How many churches do you think exist in the world at present?
Trick question: Only ONE

The church is the entire people of God; the body of Christ; God’s flock; his holy temple. There is only one true church, the church that Christ is building. There are not many churches, only many expressions of Christ's one church in various places.

*Matthew 16:18 (NIV)*
I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

*Ephesians 4:4-6 (NIV)*
There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called-- 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

How might this understanding affect how we view the role of each “local expression” of the church?

*Romans 12:4-6 (NIV)*
Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. 6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.

In the same way as individuals serve different roles in a local church, churches themselves have different strengths which impact the world in different ways. Because we have a variety of churches, we have a variety of ways of impacting this world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What are some ways various churches have unique strengths and impact?
(Either local churches in your area or denominations as a whole.)

**Possible strengths of different churches:**
- Evangelism
- Ministry to the poor
- Prayer for the city
- Children’s program
- Youth Program
- Single moms
- Men’s ministry
- Etc.
Examples of Denominational Strengths:
Salvation Army and Mennonite Brethren: Social justice
Pentecostal: Emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit
Presbyterian: Reformed theology
Baptist: Evangelism & Missions

Obviously these are broad generalities and are not always accurate. As well there are many more denominations not listed here that also have strengths in these and other areas. This is merely a list to provoke thinking.

What do you think is the unique contribution your church offers?

How does one become a member of THE church?

*Ephesians 1:13 (NIV)*
And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,

*1 Corinthians 12:13 (NIV)*
For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

One becomes a member of the church through faith in Jesus Christ, apart from one's own works.

**Baptism** in this verse is referring to our immersion in Christ. It is not talking so much about “water” baptism, but more so what water baptism represents. When baptism is mentioned in most places in the New Testament it is referring to the spiritual reality of dying to self, being immersed in Christ, and raising to new life. Water baptism is simply an external picture of the true baptism we have already undergone in Christ.

The emphasis of 1 Corinthians 12:13 is that we are baptized into ONE BODY.

So regardless of our theology, our traditions or our practises, if anyone has placed faith in Jesus Christ (apart from their own works) and the Holy Spirit dwells within them, they are a part of the one church of Jesus Christ.
Ephesians 5:23 (NIV)
Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour.

Colossians 1:18 (NIV)
And he is the head of the body, the church;

1 Peter 2:25 (NIV)
For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

What does it mean to say Christ is the head of the church?
Note: Some will argue that the word translated “head” actually means “source”, implying Jesus is the source of the church. However, biblically speaking, whatever is the source of something also has a responsibility for what flows from it. In other words, Jesus, whether the head or the source, still holds responsibility for the church.

If there is only one church, and anyone who places faith in Jesus is a member of that one church, why do local churches have membership in addition to this?

Is there any biblical model of church membership apart from the larger corporate body of Christ?
Not really! In the local churches, if anyone was a believer, they were considered a member of “the” church. There was no biblical distinction between a believer who was a “member” and a believer who was “not a member”.

Every believer:
- was considered under the authority and care of the church leadership,
- had gifts they were to use
- gathered to pray for the Spirit’s leading for the corporate church.

There was no special class or privilege called the local “member”.

Churches today often utilize membership for a variety of reasons, none of which are wrong in and of themselves. Within the New Testament, church structure was rapidly evolving as the church grew in size and complexity. Therefore, there is no one model we are told to embrace. We merely see what the church did at each stage of its development. Churches are free to determine what structure they deem best for caring for and discipling people.

In many countries, charitable organizations are required to have a membership. Scripture tells us to respect and obey the laws of our country and the idea of membership definitely has some advantages.
Instead of the term “membership”, we recommend the concept of Ministry Partnership. What might be the differences between these two concepts?

**Membership:** In our culture, membership is more often about perks and privileges than it is about responsibility. You can be a member of a store, a gym or club, and benefit from all they have to offer, yet have no personal responsibility for that organization whatsoever.

**Ministry Partnership:** Partnership implies that we are a team of people joining together for a common goal. We have all bought into the same mission and are committed to seeing it fulfilled.

What might be some of the advantages of a local church having a membership or partnership?

- Just because someone attends or even serves in a church does not mean they are committed to fulfilling that church’s specific mission. Membership/partnership helps determine who truly embraces the mission.
- It is beneficial to give people the opportunity to express that they are committed to their local church family.
- When one embraces membership/partnership, it communicates to the others they are now a part of the team.
- It helps determine who should be in leadership and teaching positions. Though membership/partnership, in and of itself, does not qualify someone for these positions, it does help filter the possibilities.
- In congregational church structures, it helps filter who has authority to vote on major church decisions.
- It calls people to higher levels of responsibility.

What do you think should be the conditions for someone to be a member/partner of a local church?

Church membership/partnership causes a person to reflect on their own commitment to the mission of Jesus Christ. Below is a list of the things that a person declares as they become a member/partner. Discuss how publically declaring each point might help a person grow in their walk with Christ and effectiveness for the kingdom.
Membership/Partnership declares:

1) I am a Follower of Jesus Christ

   This declaration is made through baptism and is simply recognized in membership/partnership.

2) I am Committed to Growing

   Jesus commanded us to learn to obey everything he taught us.

   Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV)
   Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

   We encourage churches to make small group discipleship as a prerequisite to church membership/partnership.

   You are never too old or too spiritually mature to continue growing as a disciple.

3) I catch the Vision of my local church

   Every church has its unique role to play. God has called us to fulfil a very specific mission within his kingdom and it’s not better or worse than any other church’s calling; it’s just different.

   Membership/Partnership declares that you catch the mission your church is here to fulfil. It excites you, energizes you, and makes you say, “This is worth living for!”

4) I am Responsible

   As a member/partner I am saying that I understand that I am the church. It is up to me to help make the church become what we desire it to be.

   Standing on the sidelines watching everyone else work is not an option for those who catch Christ’s vision to change lives.

   We also understand that people at various life stages have different amounts of time and energy that they can commit (pregnancy, young children, illness, etc.). But a person with a mission-oriented heart is still looking forward to the day when they can be available to play a more significant role once again.
5) I am **a Servant**

**John 13:14 (NIV)**

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.

A church member/partner is first and foremost a servant of others. It is exciting when people adopt a “whatever-it-takes” mentality to serve and build up others in the kingdom of God.

Members/Partners seek out ways to serve!

Each person has been equipped in unique ways to advance God’s kingdom.

We encourage each believer to be able to identify:

a) Their area of Ministry Passion ____________________________

b) Their primary Spiritual Gift ____________________________

If you cannot identify you passion and gifting we encourage you to ask God to reveal these to you.

(Church programs to help people discern their passion and gifts do exist, such as NEWTWORK or SHAPE. We do not include this training in this discipleship curriculum because we feel this process needs to be offered by churches much more frequently and sooner than a discipleship curriculum would allow. Often people need to go through gift/passion discovery more than once.)

6) I am **a Missionary**

**The Great Commission is your Mission**

Membership/Partnership declares that we have a passion for people to know Jesus Christ and will do whatever we can to help connect others to Christ.

God has placed us in our specific families, jobs, schools, and neighbourhoods so that we could be Salt, Ambassador, Image, and Light for him. Membership/Partnership takes this calling very seriously.

There is only one thing we will have to show Christ when we stand before him on that great day – the lives of other people who have entered his kingdom through our faithfulness; everything else pales in comparison.
Membership/Partnership says, “I care about people’s eternal destiny!”

People could just as easily, and rightly, support another church in its unique way of carrying out its mission, but Membership/Partnership claims that God has called them to this specific church, for this season, to promote his work here.

Some churches have people sign a membership/partnership agreement as part of becoming a member. What might be some benefits to this process as opposed to just verbally agreeing to be a member/partner?

1) Words are too easily spoken. Jesus understood this when he commanded us to be baptized as a declaration of our faith, instead of simply verbally announcing our identification. When we add a symbolic act to our commitment it strikes it home to both us and the community around us more than what mere words can accomplish. It is similar to the wedding band or signing the marriage license at the wedding ceremony.

2) It clearly communicates to the community that you are committing to being fully with them in their vision and mission. It declares that you too will step along side the team to do your part to help this little corner of God’s kingdom grow. It is now YOUR church!

Whatever process a church uses, it is good to have some symbolic act to strike home the significance of what one is doing when they commit to being part of the team.

In a city with many churches, membership/partnership invites you to embrace the specific ministry goals your church has and to become a servant in helping the church move forward in its vision direction.

Membership/Partnership is NOT about privilege or benefit, but about SERVING.